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ABSTRACT

The increasingly common practice of retaining kindergarten children by enrolling them in alternative programs instead of first grade is briefly discussed in terms of what research says about retention, the social stigma of retention, the escalating kindergarten curriculum, and alternatives to retention. It is argued that the fad to flunk kindergarten children is the product of inappropriate curriculum. Schools with appropriate curriculum and collegial understandings among teachers and principals make retention unnecessary. Once the larger context of curriculum escalation is understood, teachers and principals will have increased incentive to resist the pressures and accountability culture that render more and more children "unready." (RH)

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Escalating Kindergarten Curriculum

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The practice of kindergarten retention is increasing dramatically. In some districts, as many as 60% of kindergartners are judged to be unready for first grade. These children are provided with alternative programming: developmental kindergarten (followed by regular kindergarten), transition or pre-first grade, or the repeating of kindergarten.

An extra year before first grade is intended to protect unready children from entering too soon into a demanding academic environment where, it is thought, they will almost surely experience failure. The extra year is meant to be a time when immature children can grow and develop learning readiness skills, and children with deficient prereading skills can strengthen them. When parents are asked to agree to retention or transition placement, they are often told that with an extra year to grow, their children will move to the top of their classes and become leaders.

Advocates of kindergarten retention are undoubtedly well-intentioned. They see retention as a way for the school to respond to children's enormous differences in background, developmental stages, and aptitude. They view retention as a means of preventing failure before it occurs.

What Research Says About Retention

The research on kindergarten retention which we conducted from 1984-88 led to three major findings:

1. Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement;
2. Regardless of what the extra year may be called, there is a social stigma for children who attend an extra year;
3. Retention actually fosters inappropriate academic demands in first grade.

We have located 14 controlled studies that document effects of kindergarten retention. Six were included in Gredler's (1984) major review of research on transition rooms, and eight were newly indentified empirical studies. The dominant finding is one of no difference between retained and promoted children. Gredler concluded that at-risk children promoted to first grade performed as well or better than children who spent an extra year in transition rooms. In another study, retained children were matched with promoted children. At the end of first grade, children in the two groups did not differ on standardized math scores or on teacher ratings of reading and math achievement, learner self-concept, social maturity, and attention span (Shepard and Smith, 1985).

Though many retention advocates cite findings that seem to be positive, these studies are often flawed. A major flaw is the absence of a control group. A control group is a critical element in the process of determining differences between children who have been promoted and children who have been retained or placed in transition classes. Studies with control groups consistently show that readiness gains do not persist into the next grade. Children end up at approximately the same percentile rank compared to their new grade peers as they would have had they stayed with their age peers. Furthermore, young and at-risk students who are promoted perform as well in first grade as do retained students.

Tests that are used to determine readiness are not sufficiently accurate to justify extra-year placements. For example, Kaufman and Kaufman (1972) have provided the only reliability data on the widely used Gesell School Readiness Test. They found a standard error of measurement equivalent to six months; in other words, a child who is measured to be at a developmental level of 4 1/2 years, and thus unready for school, could easily be at a development level of 5 years, and fully ready. As many as 30-50% of children will be falsely identified as unready (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Kindergarten teachers are generally unaware of these end results. They know only that retained children do better than they did in their first year of kindergarten. In the short run, teachers see progress: longer attention spans, better compliance with classroom rules, and success with paper and pencil tasks that were a struggle the year before. But these relatively few academic benefits do not usually persist into later grades.

Social Stigma of Retention

Retained children understand that because of something that is wrong with them, they cannot go on with their

classmates. Retained children know that they are not making normal progress. They also know the implicit meaning of placement in ability groups such as "the bluebird reading group."

Kindergarten retention is traumatic and disruptive for children. This conclusion is supported by our extensive interviews with parents of retained children. Most parents report significant negative emotional effects associated with retention. Parents' qualitative assessments of their retained children also support our arguments about the social stigma of retention. Kindergarten retention also has a negative consequence over the long run. Children who are too old for their grade are much more likely than their classmates to drop out of school.

The Escalating Kindergarten Curriculum

The fad to flunk kindergartners is the product of inappropriate curriculum. For the last 20 years, there has been a persistent escalation of academic demand on kindergartners and first-graders. In one survey, 85% of elementary principals indicated that academic achievement in kindergarten has medium or high priority in their schools (Educational Research Service, 1986). Many middle-class parents who visit their child's school convey the message that their only criterion for judging a teacher's effectiveness is the teacher's success in advancing their child's reading accomplishments. What was formerly expected for the next grade has been shoved downward into the lower grade. More academics borrowed from the next grade is not necessarily better learning. A dozen national organizations have issued position statements decrying the negative effects of a narrow focus on literacy and mathematical proficiency in the earliest grades (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1988).

Many kindergarten teachers acknowledge that extra-year programs would be unnecessary if children went on to a flexible, child-centered first grade. But educators do not express an awareness that retention may actually contribute to the escalation of curriculum. Teachers naturally adjust what they teach to the level of their students. If many children are older and read, then teachers will not teach as if the room were full of five-year-olds. The subtle adjustment of curricular expectations to the capabilities of an older, faster-moving group is demonstrated in the research literature on school entrance ages (Shepard & Smith, 1988). The victims of inappropriate curriculum are the children judged inadequate by its standards: children who can't stay in the lines and sit still long enough.

Alternatives to Retention

One alternative can be found in schools where teachers and principals are committed to adapting curriculum and instructional practices to a wide range of individual differences. In such schools, a child who is not yet proficient is not failed. The kindergarten teacher begins at the child's level and moves him along to the extent possible. The first-grade teacher picks up where the kindergarten teacher left off. In between-grade arrangements, children move freely across grade boundaries in such activities as cross-age tutoring or student visits to the next grade for three hours a week. The average standardized achievement test scores for third graders in these schools are no different from those of students in high-retaining schools.

Schools with appropriate curriculum and collegial understandings among teachers and principals make retention unnecessary. Once the larger context of curriculum escalation is understood, teachers and principals may have greater incentive to resist the pressures and accountability culture that render more and more children "unready."

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For more information:

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